

NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5919
JOHN ROBERTS/JOHANNESBURG

JUNE 15, 1978

SOWETO: TWO YEARS LATER

ANNCR:

TUESDAY (JUNE 16) MARKS THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF THE ANTI-GOVERNMENT RIOTS BY SCHOOLCHILDREN IN THE SPRAWLING BLACK TOWNSHIP OF SOWETO, OUTSIDE SOUTH AFRICA'S COMMERCIAL CENTER OF JOHANNESBURG. VOA CORRESPONDENT JOHN ROBERTS HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT ON SOWETO TWO YEARS LATER.

VOICE:

IT WAS JUST TWO YEARS AGO THAT A THIRTEEN YEAR OLD SOWETO YOUTH, HECTOR PETERSON, BECAME THE FIRST CASUALTY IN A STORM OF RIOTING WHICH HAD SPREAD FROM SOWETO TO OTHER BLACK TOWNSHIPS AND EVENTUALLY CLAIMED AN ESTIMATED SEVEN HUNDRED LIVES. THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF SOWETO WERE REBELLING AGAINST THE ENFORCED LEARNING OF THE AFRIKAAN LANGUAGE. BUT THE ISSUE WAS SOON ENGULFED BY A WIDE-RANGE OF GRIEVANCES FROM SOUTH AFRICA'S OFFICIAL APARTHEID POLICY.

IN THE ENSUING TWO YEARS, THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT APPEARS TO HAVE FOLLOWED A TWO-PRONGED POLICY TOWARD THE VOLATILE TOWNSHIP WHICH HOUSES NEARLY ONE AND ONE HALF MILLION BLACKS. THEY ARE A RUTHLESS STIFFLING OF DISSENT TOGETHER WITH AN EASING OF SOME OF THE MORE REPUGNANT FORMS OF PETTY APARTHEID. ON THE FIRST POINT, THERE HAVE BEEN INCREASED DETENTIONS UNDER THE TERRORISM ACT. IT'S ESTIMATED THAT SEVEN HUNDRED DISSIDENTS ARE BEING HELD WITHOUT CHARGES OR TRIAL.

LAST OCTOBER, NINETEEN MILITANT ORGANIZATIONS WERE BANNED, ALONG WITH THE BLACK NEWSPAPER "THE WORLD," AND SCORES OF BLACK LEADERS WERE DETAINED. THIS EFFECTIVELY CREATED A LEADERSHIP VACUUM IN SOWETO WHICH REMAINS TODAY. THE STUDENTS WERE

SUCCESSFUL IN FORCING THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOWETO URBAN BANTU COUNCIL AND IN PUSHING A SCHOOL BOYCOTT THAT CUT ENROLLMENT BY HALF AND CAUSED HUNDREDS OF SOWETO TEACHERS TO RESIGN IN SYMPATHY.

BUT PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT EFFECT OF THE SOWETO RIOTS WAS THE EXODUS OF SOWETO YOUTH TO NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES WHERE THEY REPORTEDLY HAVE BEEN UNDERGOING TRAINING IN URBAN GUERRILLA WARFARE. OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT FIGURES SAY THERE ARE AS MANY AS FOUR THOUSAND IN TRAINING CAMPS, AND THE NUMBER IS EXPECTED TO INCREASE. BUT BLACK LEADERS IN SOWETO POINT OUT THAT TEN THOUSAND SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN ARE SIMPLY MISSING FROM SOWETO, AND THEY CONCLUDE THAT THE NUMBER OF YOUTH IN TRAINING GUERRILLA CAMPS MUST BE MUCH HIGHER.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN, THERE WERE SOME POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE PAST TWO YEARS. THESE INCLUDE A VIRTUAL END TO SEGREGATED SPORTS AND A RISE IN THE NUMBER OF INTER-RACIAL THEATERS, NIGHTCLUBS AND RESTAURANTS A GOVERNMENT PLEDGE TO SPEND MILLIONS MORE ON BLACK HOUSING THE ELIMINATION OF THE HATED WORD "BANTU".... GREATER SENSITIVITY TOWARD BLACK PROBLEMS BY THE NEW MINISTER OF PLURAL RELATIONS EFFORTS IN SOME COMMERCIAL SECTORS TO CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN WHITES AND BLACKS AND THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF A FIVE-YEAR DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR URBAN BLACKS.

BUT MOST BLACK LEADERS IN SOWETO AND ELSEWHERE VIEW THESE CHANGES AS COSMETIC WITH LITTLE REAL EFFECT ON THE GOVERNMENT'S BASIC POLICY OF SEPARATE DEVELOPMENT. THEY SAY THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS ARE TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE, AND FALL WAY SHORT OF SATISFYING BLACK ASPIRATIONS.

JS/PY